

VZCZCXRO0240
PP RUEHCHI
DE RUEHVN #0447/01 1390430
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 190430Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9919
INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 6574
RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI 2645
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 2107
RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 1761
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0377
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000447

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2016

TAGS: [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LA](#)

SUBJECT: DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY: LAOS REWRITES ITS
PAST

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Laos isn't unique among countries whose governments rewrite history to serve their own ends, but the Communist leadership here has taken the process to its extreme. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has concocted a black-and-white version of the recent past that is designed purely to serve political ends. The pre-1975 Royal Lao Government and Laos' "colonial oppressors" (Thailand, France and the U.S.) are equally vilified. Unsurprisingly, the Party has airbrushed the post-1975 period as well, conveniently dispensing with the 1975-1986 "high socialism" of reeducation camps, collectivized farms, defrocked monks and refugee drain. Laos' young are learning nothing of their real past, and the old find it convenient to forget. Few Lao of any age seem to be aware of the extent to which their history has been reconfigured by the regime. Therein lies the danger: soothed by a fairy-tale history, the Lao people are lulled into a complacency that leaves them ill-equipped to deal with a changing world. End summary.

Lao history, the Communist way

12. (C) A visit to any of Vientiane's "museums" -- the Kaysone Phomvihane Museum, National Museum, or the newly-opened Army Museum -- is an eye-opener for anyone expecting a third-world Smithsonian. These institutions are not about presenting a balanced view of the past; they provide a near-fictional account of Laos' heroic struggle against a series of ill-intended colonial oppressors, from the Thai to the French to the Americans. The central theme is the LPRP's single-minded dedication to liberating and developing Laos.

13. (C) The displays (almost identical in the three museums in spite of their disparate subjects) make few efforts at serious scholarship: photos of what are clearly Vietnamese soldiers in the Army Museum are labeled "Pathet Lao fighters," presumably because the museum staff couldn't find a picture of a Pathet Lao soldier anywhere near a front line. A circa-1900 picture of "French colonial invaders" looks more like some turn-of-the-century hunting party, and probably was. What matters is not factual accuracy in the details but the creation of an impression, of a good-versus-evil world where Laos' Communists (with a little help from their Vietnamese comrades) saved Laos from extinction and single-handedly crafted the workers' paradise it is today.

14. (C) That theme, monolithic in its delivery, suffuses modern-day Laos. It is being given even greater emphasis as

Laos moves farther from its revolutionary beginnings and interest in the past wanes. Lao students learn this imaginary version of history from their first years; the drumbeat continues (for the minority who are given the opportunity) right through high schools and university. Lao "history books" take up the message. Histories that have been published in the last decade, including a magnum opus "History of Laos" and several heroic accounts of the Pathet Lao struggle during the war (one authored, or so it says, by the Deputy Defense Minister), would do Stalin proud. They describe historical events that bear little resemblance to the Lao history described by Thai or western scholars. Beyond this, every speech, every newspaper article, and every conversation with a Lao official that touches on Lao history echoes this fictionalized rendering of the past.

Fiddling with the facts

15. (C) Laos is a one-party state, with a tightly-controlled media and no free press, and there is no alternative to LPRP official history except in the memories of those old enough to have lived through it. One example of creative rewriting that we've seen over the past year is the series of anniversaries of diplomatic ties, including between the U.S. and Laos. The Party has made a point of celebrating 50-year anniversaries of relations between a number of countries and "the Lao PDR," although the Lao PDR only came into existence in 1975. Those earlier ties were with the Royal Lao Government, but the Party clearly would prefer that footnote be forgotten.

16. (C) Even the post-1975 period (the "independence period," the LPRP calls it, forgetting that the Royal Lao Government

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was both independent and held a seat in the UN for 20 years before 1975) has not been immune from reinvention. The decade after 1975 was indeed one that most people would as soon forget: nearly all former officials and soldiers of the old regime were sent to brutal reeducation camps, where many died; the government instituted a harsh form of collectivization that bred starvation in some areas; zealous Party officials tried to abolish Buddhism; and at least a tenth of the population voted with their feet and fled to refugee camps in Thailand.

17. (C) But today, the Party makes almost no mention of what Lao scholar Grant Evans refers to as the period of "high socialism." Evans, an Australian scholar now with the Ecole Francaise d'Extrême Orient (ESEO) in Vientiane, has been especially critical of the Party's airbrushing of the recent past. Lao discussions of the Lao PDR's history increasingly ignore those first ten years, and only comment on events since 1986, when Laos adopted economic reform. The mistakes of the first decade are being conveniently written out of history.

The Tham Pieu hoax

18. (C) The "Tham Pieu Tragedy" provides a case study in how the LPRP is manipulating the past. According to the Lao government, in November 1968 an American aircraft fired two missiles into Tham Pieu cave in eastern Xieng Khouang province, killing 374 innocent villagers who were sheltering there. This incident was largely unknown until a few years ago, when the government suddenly resurrected it as a textbook American atrocity. Over time more details have been added on the tragedy. The government now commemorates the event each year on its anniversary with a gathering of senior Party officials at the site, and recently opened a museum near the cave, complete with graphic paintings of bloody bodies in the aftermath of the attack. The story approximates My Lai in its horrific details of hundreds of innocents dying at the hands of bloodthirsty Americans.

19. (C) The big difference between Tham Pieu and My Lai is

that Tham Pieu is a lie. Villagers in the area know the "official" story well, and will repeat it to any travelers. Quietly, however, some Xieng Khouang natives (including the son of the wartime governor of the province) have told us that Tham Pieu was in fact a North Vietnamese arms dump and hideout. The aircraft that fired the missile was most likely a Royal Lao Air Force T-28, whose rockets set off secondary explosions that killed numerous Vietnamese soldiers and probably some civilians as well. The cave's location at the entrance to the Ban Ban valley, the PAVN's main staging area for attacks on the Plain of Jars, made it an unavoidable target. The story is tragic, but the reality bears little resemblance to the GoL's fantasy. Nevertheless, since the Party incorporated Tham Pieu into its account of the war, the details have been repeated so often that the GoL's version is usually taken at face value. Some guidebooks dutifully repeat the government's line, but the bible of Lao backpackers, "Lonely Planet," notes that most of those killed were Vietnamese and that Vietnam repatriated most of the remains in the cave in the 1980's.

¶10. (C) With a young population and fewer people each year who remember the pre-1975 period, the Communist version of history, with Tham Pieu and a hundred other incidents, is the only game in town. The Party is determined to make its version real, borrowing a page from "1984," by telling the story until it becomes fact. The spurt of new museums (the Lao also opened a museum to the Lao PDR's first president, the "Red Prince" Souphanouvong, concurrent with the new Army Museum) and the release of half a dozen history books in the last few years reveal a commitment to make their story stick. In fifty years, who will know better? Riding the currents from one regime to another, the Lao appear content with the history they are fed.

Who will remember?

¶11. (C) Grant Evans has written about Laos' collective amnesia and would like to fight the current, but as a foreigner is at a disadvantage. He has recently written a history of the royal family of Laos, focusing on its last 100 years and drawing on the recollections and collected memorabilia of dozens of persons associated with the court in

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its last years. The book was a labor of love to preserve some piece of Laos' last monarchs, consigned to the dustbin by the regime (although bizarrely two statues of King Sisavang Vong, who died in 1960, still stand in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, left up by the regime after 1975 because they were gifts to the Royal Lao Government from the Soviet Union).

¶12. (C) His book will never see the light of day in Laos, but Evans has undertaken another history project with more promise. With Swedish government funding, he has completed a Lao translation of another of his works, "A Short History of Laos." Evans told us the original chapter on the post-1975 period was "too sensitive" and was excised from the translation, but the rest, including its discussion of the war (with North Vietnamese aggression) was left intact. Evans and his supporters hope to distribute the book in "urban guerilla" fashion, handing out free copies to anyone interested, since there is no hope the Ministry of Information and Culture will sign off. The object, as Dr. Evans has said, is to leave some reminder to the Lao people that their past is far more shaded -- and more interesting -- than the version purveyed by the Communists.

Comment

¶13. (C) The Lao people are complicit in this Orwellian rewriting of the past. Even those who were part of the old system play along with the lie, pretending they were somehow on the side of the Communists all along. History, ultimately, simply doesn't matter to most people, and if the government wants to change the past, so be it. No doubt the

Communists' job is made easier by the note of national pride their history strikes in many Lao. To rank-and-file Lao, it is a matter of honor, if not of historical accuracy, that the LPRP fought off three colonial oppressors and single-handedly rescued Laos from sublimation by imperialist powers.

¶14. (C) But the Lao are losing sight of where they have been, forgetting their dramatic and colorful and turbid history. By accepting at face value the Party's account of its unbroken success in delivering independence and national development, the Lao people have been lulled into a complacency that does not allow them to judge critically where they stand in the world. They have little sense of how poorly the Party and government have served them, or how much farther along Laos might have been if things had worked out differently. The Party has largely succeeded in rewriting the past, but at the cost of leaving the country with no real sense of its future. End comment.
HASLACH